

Minorities, the law and equality for all

AMID howls of anguish from the Left, led by the attention-seeking actress Vanessa Redgrave, traveller families are finally to be removed from the largest unauthorised site in Britain. Not before time.

Yes, many may feel sorry for the children who are to be turned out of their homes.

But the blame lies squarely with their parents, who knowingly flouted the law when they bought a field in the green belt and built on it without permission.

What would become of our society if we all felt free to ignore the law?

Indeed, our true sympathy should be with the travellers' law-abiding neighbours, who say their lives have been made 'hell' by the camp during a decade-long legal battle.

Their ordeal isn't over yet. As we report today, police fear anarchists are infiltrating the site, hoping to turn the eviction into a pitched battle.

With disgraceful hyperbole, Ms Redgrave invokes the name of Hitler to explain her support for the travellers. 'I'm not making comparisons,' she says, 'I'm just saying that minorities were destroyed.'

She needs a history lesson. Hitler's crimes began when he decreed the law should discriminate between ethnic groups. In a free society, the law treats everyone the same.

Truly free schools...

WITH the opening of the first of Michael Gove's free schools, today begins an experiment which deserves every success.

By allowing parents, teachers and faith groups to set up taxpayer-funded schools, independent of local authority control, the Education Secretary is introducing an element of real choice and diversity to a monolithic state system.

But while this is hugely welcome, it will clearly take a great deal more than a few free schools (and only 24 have been approved so far) to solve the deep-rooted problems at the heart of a system that has betrayed far too many of our young.

More significant will be Mr Gove's drive to promote traditional subjects, which is already bearing fruit. A survey this week shows the numbers studying history, geography and languages at GCSE are sharply up, after years of decline.

Meanwhile, he is forging ahead with plans to accord academy status to ever-growing numbers of schools, freeing them from bureaucratic interference.

All credit to a man who stands out in a rudderless Cabinet as a minister with a clear sense of direction.

But how frustrating that David Cameron, in an act that smacks of political cowardice, has ruled out the one freedom that might make more difference than all Mr Gove's measures put together.

Can any school be truly free, while it is denied the freedom to select its pupils?

Swift justice works

SITTING at weekends and long into the evenings, magistrates deserve resounding thanks for their handling of the rioters who terrorised our cities last month.

With their robust sentences, meted out so swiftly, they've established a firm link in the minds of young hooligans between crime and its consequences.

And who can doubt that thousands who joined the mayhem, imagining the law had no teeth, will think twice next time?

But what a contrast this fast and firm justice is with the lenient and drawn-out variety we've all become used to.

Only this week, it emerges that the number of career criminals spared jail rocketed last year, with 4,000 offenders handed community sentences despite totting up at least 50 convictions each. No wonder they reoffend.

We've seen how effective British justice can be, with the right will and energy behind it. Is it too much to hope the Bench will remember the lesson?

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Travellers invaded my village a year ago – and it's sheer hell. Don't tell me they're the victims

by David McGrath



RETURNING from a Bank Holiday weekend in Torquay to our home in the quiet West Midlands village of Meriden, I was greeted by an appalling vision.

Bulldozers, earthmovers, cranes and lorries were desecrating hitherto unspoilt land just yards from my front door.

Already a lot of damage had been done. The topsoil had been removed, trees destroyed and caravans parked.

Hordes of travellers had quietly bought a plot of land which is set aside for green belt and agricultural use and were unlawfully building on it.

It is no exaggeration to say that weekend in May 2010 was the beginning of an endless nightmare. It's not just the rubbish left everywhere by the travellers, the endless noise nor even the destruction of our peaceful rural outlook.

Challenge

Along with my fellow villagers, I have received an appalling and constant volley of abuse. I have had death threats and warnings that my house will be burned down. I have been accused of racism, of being a paedophile. I have even been reduced to tears by stress.

And all because of the travellers who decided, illegally, that they would build their homes next to mine.

Sadly, my situation is hardly unique. The abuse of the planning process by travellers is happening all over the country – as exemplified by the saga of the Dale Farm site at Basildon in Essex, Europe's largest illegal encampment which is occupied by more than 80 families.

In Essex, as in Meriden, the depth of the commitment from local people has been inspirational, showing that the travellers can be challenged.

A local protest group formed swiftly after the travellers' arrival in our peaceful village – a protest which has now lasted more than 500 days.

It has been an exhausting experience, because of the naked intimidation from the travellers.

Typical is this message we

recently received: 'Build a bonfire, build a bonfire! Put Meriden in the middle. Put all residents in the middle. And burn the f---ing lot.'

Such offensive language makes a mockery of the pretence, so assiduously cultivated by the politically correct brigade, that travellers are an oppressed ethnic minority who have to endure constant racism from the settled population.

Indeed, accusations of racism have become a shield to protect travellers from criticism about their behaviour. In the fashionable narrative of victimhood, they have been portrayed as a group suffering from social exclusion and prejudice.

So, according to this mentality, any criticism of their conduct, from tax evasion to relieving amounts to nothing more than bigotry.

But I can categorically say that this is all sentimental nonsense. The argument has nothing to do with racism and everything to do with law-breaking.

The real bullies are not fictional extremists but some of the travellers themselves, who seek to achieve their goals by brute force and fear. Over the past 16 months at Meriden, the local residents have even had to endure threats that our houses will be burned down.

I once received a serious warning that there was a contract out to kill me. As part of the travellers' campaign to destroy my reputation, I have been the subject of a barrage of frivolous complaints to the police.

One absurd claim was that I had been spying at night on travellers' children in the site's toilets. I don't even know where these toilets are!

One Meriden resident found herself being tailgated when she was driving home at night. When she finally arrived at her house and, in her terror, rang the police, she found that she had been already reported for shouting 'racist abuse' at

those who were following her. On another occasion, I was accused of untethering their horses so they escaped from the camp.

Vehicles have been parked across the gates of my home to stop me getting out, while I have also had to put a concrete block on my driveway to stop it being used by lorries.

These trucks are just one distressing facet of the travellers' numerous business interests, which include selling copper wiring and making Tarmac – which causes much noise, smell and disturbance to myself and other residents.

Of course, we are not the only ones who have had to put up with these problems.

In Essex, local residents also found that, while the travellers bought the land legitimately, they then illegally built on it, laying concrete pitches, Tarmac roadways and even some permanent bungalows, none of which had planning permission.

Their confidence in ignoring the law has been bolstered by the army of noisy supporters, who absurdly paint the travellers as victims of state oppression.

Posturing

Typical of this deluded stance is the posturing of veteran actress and revolutionary socialist Vanessa Redgrave, who yesterday visited Dale Farm, expressed outrage at the idea of closing the site and spoke of the local travellers as a 'strong, wise, gentle community'.

Any private individual behaving like the Dale Farm lot would soon have felt the full force of the law. Yet because of the climate of appeasement engendered by political correctness, the machinery of the state has long hesitated to take any action.

Only now, after a protracted legal battle, are the police and the local council threatening to evict the travellers from their

unauthorised site. Meanwhile, the law-abiding local residents seem to have no choice but to put up with the intimidation and inconvenience of living next to these traveller sites.

The toll of this struggle in Meriden has been high. When I was giving evidence at a recent public inquiry into the site, I broke down in tears, such was the stress I have been feeling over these long months. Inevitably, this led to a series of cruel, mocking calls from the travellers.

But they will not win. The fight must go on, not just for the sake of our village, but also for so many others and their inhabitants.

Precision

What has been inspirational about the battle of Meriden is how it has led around 40 other villages throughout the country to take a stand against the travellers, who until now have been able to operate with military precision in their land grabs.

Their chosen method is to buy a piece of land on the green belt – always cheaper than other land because it is almost impossible to get planning permission for construction.

Then, on a Bank Holiday, they move in the tractors and bulldozers, knowing that the municipal officials who might try to stop them will be away.

Meanwhile, just before five o'clock in the afternoon, they put an envelope through the door of the local town hall, in which they apply retrospectively for planning permission, thereby trying to give themselves a spurious fig leaf of legality.

But, thanks partly to the Meriden example, village campaigners are wise to these tactics.

The travellers operate by bulldozer and barrister. But they should not be allowed to get away with it any longer. Those of us opposing their sites are not asking for anything special. We just want the laws that we obey to be applied to travellers.

That would be true equality. At present, what we have in Britain is discrimination – against the settled population.